



© AP/WWP

Arthur Miller in Indian Theater

By ROMESH CHANDER

American playwright's recognizable characters, themes of shattered dreams and the struggle for success resonate with Indian audiences.

*Satish Kaushik in the title role of Feroz Khan's 2002 Hindi production, Salesman Ramlal, India's most successful adaptation of an Arthur Miller play.
Top: Miller in 1990.*

The works of American playwright Arthur Miller, who died this February at 89, are among the most translated and adapted in India, having been staged in English, Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi and other languages within a few years of their appearance on Broadway or the West End.

Miller's flawed, struggling characters—most often placed in desperate domestic, economic or social situations—resonate with the Indian middle class. The characters are very much like people Indian theatergoers recognize within their society or their families.

B.R. Bhargava, visiting professor at the National School of Drama in New Delhi and a freelance theater critic, suggests that the most important factors for the unprecedented success of Miller's plays in India are "the thematic content and its structure, conflict between an individual and his society, shattered dreams and failure of expectations culminating into the tragedy of a man."

For half a century, Miller served as a social and moral conscience of the American people, telling tales of relationships and lives shipwrecked on the rocks of false values. For him the theater was not merely a form of entertainment. It was a serious undertaking, which serves "to make man more human, that is, less alone."

*Keshav Anand
and Shanaz Italia
in Ruchika
Theatre Group's
The Crucible,
directed by Faisal
Alkazi in 1987.*



Courtesy Ruchika Theatre Group

Miller's first play to be presented on the professional stage after World War II was *All My Sons*, which appeared on Broadway in January 1947. It dealt with the destruction of a middle class family through the revelation that the father, a war profiteer, had sold defective machinery to the U.S. Air Force, an act that brings nemesis upon his own progeny. Indian audi-

ences are familiar with such situations nearer home. The play was in the Henrik Ibsen mold in its treatment of the inevitable retribution resulting from the gross violation of basic human values. Ibsen was a 19th-century Norwegian playwright admired for his technical mastery, symbolism and deep psychological insight. His works, like those of Russia's Anton Chekhov on similar themes, are also popular in India.

Death of a Salesman, directed by Elia Kazan, with Paul Muni in the leading role, was presented in London in July 1949. It deals with the desperate struggle for survival of an itinerant salesman in a highly competitive world. The playwright's subtle directions suggest a premonition of disaster, the snuffing out of salesman Willy Loman's dream of owning a house, the cruel absurdity of his suicide, even as the last installment on the family home has been paid. Miller's mastery of characterization, dramatic form, and sense of human suffering is revealed quietly, but with a shattering emotional intensity.

In the 1950s, *The Crucible*, set during the 17th-century Salem witch trials mania, was Miller's allegorical indictment of the communist-hunting excesses of the McCarthy era, which had brutalized decent citizens into betraying their closest friends and professional associates. Miller himself was scrutinized by the House Un-American Activities Committee and cited for contempt of the U.S. Congress for refusing to identify writers he had met at a communist meeting many years before. In Salem, Massachusetts, from June through September 1692, 19 men and women were hanged and a man over 80 was pressed to death under heavy stones on allegations of witchcraft made by their neighbors.

Indian adapters retained spirit of the text

Miller's structure and his treatment of the theme have played a big role in acceptability of his plays on the Indian stage and much credit goes to the writers who translated or adapted Miller to Indian languages. Their careful work by and large retained the structure and the spirit of the text, widening Miller's reach here.

"There was something premonitory about it, when Ashim Chakraborty chose to adapt and play Miller's *Death of a Salesman* as *Janiaker Mritzu* in Bengali in 1966," says Samik Bandyopadhyay, a scholar and critic of the arts in Calcutta. Two years after Jawaharlal Nehru's death, he says, "the generation of liberals that preceded the 'Midnight's Children' had just started coming out...of their complacent trust in the success of the Nehruvian agenda, and becoming aware of the

sneaking entry of yet another agenda of success.”

“Post-independence Bengali theater has been too often deprecated for its readiness to grab and adapt plays from other languages at the cost of developing and nurturing indigenous playwriting,” says Bandyopadhyay. “But maybe it’s a greater commit-

sively the business community,” he says. “The play, in spite of its fine productional values, had to be taken off the stage after three shows.”

Of Miller’s 24 plays, just half a dozen have been staged in Indian languages. These are *All My Sons* (1947), *Death of a Salesman* (1949), *The Crucible* (1953), *A View from the Bridge* (1955), *Incident at Vichy* (1964) and *The Price* (1968).

Director Faisal Alkazi says Miller’s early plays find an instant echo in India because they deal with the tension between family and society as in *All My Sons*, which was beautifully and rather typically translated into Hindi as *Sara Sansaar*; *Apna Parivar*.

Easy transition to Indian setting

In *A View from the Bridge*, the immigrant experiences of Sicilians in America could easily be the Punjabi immigrant staying in England, with the clash between values of the mother country and the adopted country, notes Alkazi. And that’s how Ruchika Theatre Group adapted it in 1982, setting it in London’s Southall district. A few tweaks of phrase, Indian names for the characters and a couple of Punjabi idioms and endearments, and the play fit perfectly, appearing simultaneously as tragic immigrant tale and a universal contemporary myth of the rootless self.

But of course it is *Death of a Salesman* that is the most universal of Miller’s plays. The human tale of the traveling salesman has been played in Bengali by Rudraprasad Sengupta; in Hindi by Satish Kaushik in the Feroz Khan-directed *Salesman Ramlal*, the most popular Indian adaptation to date; and in English by Alyque Padamsee. Bhanu Bharati directed a memorable production of it many years ago as *Ek Salesman ki Maut* in J.N. Kaushal’s excellent adaptation of the play to a setting in New Delhi’s Karol Bagh area, as did Ebrahim Alkazi in his production of the same adaptation in the late 1990s with his group, Living Theatre.

Miller captured the dilemma of the middle class male of today—holding onto patriarchal values of another earlier age in a world that has changed forever—leading lives marooned and isolated, fragile, tragic. And the fact that all his heroes are middle-aged gives tremendous scope to actors at the prime of their careers to essay the moody, fractured, contemporary man. □

About the Author: Romesh Chander is a senior theater writer and drama critic with The Hindu.



Courtesy Act One

A scene from Act One’s Hai Wahi Baat Yun Bhi Aur Yun Bhi, based on Arthur Miller’s Incident at Vichy.

ment to an ideology of response to the times over a concern for the future of theater that lies at the core of this tendency. It was this tendency that drew Bengali theater to *Salesman* in 1966, and brought it back to the same play in 1993, with the Nandikar Group’s revival as *Feriwallah-r Mrityu*, directed by Rudraprasad Sengupta, in a social scenario overcharged with buying and selling—and aggressive salesmanship!”

Bandyopadhyay says, “The family, which has been Miller’s site for his preoccupation with the decay of a sharing collectivity, has also been the favorite site of conventional Bengali playwriting, and quite naturally Miller’s works have been taken up in *The Price* as *Neelam Neelam* (1987) by Ashit Mukherjee for the Gandhar drama group, and *A View from the Bridge* as *Gotraheen* (1996) by Sengupta for Nandikar.”

“Measuring by popular response,” Banyopadhyay says, “the 1966 *Salesman* and the 1987 *The Price* were runaway successes, running for more than two years at a stretch (performing two to three times a month), more maybe for their obvious performance and acting values than their politics, which also contributed to the reception.”

Toward the end of the 1960s, he notes, Calcutta’s leading Hindi theater group, Anamika, staged a version of *All My Sons* translated as *Mere Bachhey*. “One wonders who chose this text that centers on industry’s anti-humanity for an audience that was almost exclu-